Lost and Found:

A Phenomenology of Disorientation

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I am writing this essay from my room in Peckham, London. If I were to march south-east in a straight line, I would find myself walking exactly 10,851.98 kilometres to reach my room in Seletar, Singapore. But here I am, a third-generation Singaporean-Chinese woman, living in a house a twenty-five minute drive away from the Prime Meridian of the World in Greenwich. That is the line that dictates my family and hometown lives in a temporality eight hours ahead of me, the line that inscribes itself as a 'here' to all 'there's.

As Sara Ahmed writes, '[i]t matters how we arrive at the places we do.'[1] It can be said that my arrival in London is marked by the moment the aeroplane I was on touched down in Heathrow Airport at 5:15pm on the 15th of September, 2021. Yet I am still arriving, nearly three years on. To have left a place of familiarity to an unfamiliar one, I have experienced many moments of disjointment. I struggled to position myself in any sense to the world. Impressions and memories slipped away without any groundedness, and this essay's nonlinear format is honest to the achronological process of attempting to trace and reconfigure relations. As Leibniz wrote in New Essays on Human Understanding, "[w]hen we are not alerted, so to speak, to pay heed to certain of our own present perceptions, we allow them to slip by unconsidered and even unnoticed."[2] To recognise my disorientation was the first step of this alertion. As I use phenomenology to find my way around the plethora of states I was entangled in, the occurrences that seemed so ungraspable then have begun to enter my reach. In the efforts to make sense of these experiences I have found Sara Ahmed's 2006 text

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[1] Ahmed, Sara. 2006. Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others. Durham: Duke University Press. 2.
[2] Leibniz, Von, Peter Remnant, and Jonathan Bennett. 1996. New Essays on Human Understanding. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others especially elucidatory and aptly orientating. It is a text that I hold dear to me and will be referencing extensively throughout this essay to help me to investigate the shifts in my perception.

This is an ongoing process to orientate my present mode of being, and a re-orientation of past notions of self in both London and Singapore. It was due time, as I soon realised, to trouble previous orientations as well. However, the work of orientating oneself is never-ending. Even though phenomenology has and continues to shape my thinking, attempting to address all of these changes will prove difficult for an essay of three thousand words. Therefore, I will be zeroing in on how I orientated my relationship with what it means to be at 'home', focusing specifically on the trouble it took to even begin.

I. Getting lost

To find our way, we have to first realise that we are lost. This realisation is not as simple or straightforward as it appears to be: widely described as an instinctive feeling, unfamiliarity requires a hidden reference point of familiarity and something you know, or once knew. In her text, Ahmed asks herself, as well as readers: 'Why start with phenomenology?'[3] What I find especially important in the work of phenomenology is the careful attention to personal experience, the 'central[ising]' of 'orientation'[4]. Before I knew how to 'see from somewhere'[5] (borrowing the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty), I was in a state that I believe comes before disorientation. This made the process of situating myself much more perplexing. The synonyms of 'disorientated' are listed as having lost one's bearings, going round in circles, all over the place, spaced out. The list goes on, but I wish to draw attention to the fact that these terms are spatialised descriptions, suggesting an absence of direction that is co-constituted by its presence. What I had was an absence of orientation completely. I had never

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[3] Ahmed, Sara. 2006. Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others. Durham: Duke University Press. 2.
[4] ibid.
[5] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2002. Phenomenology of Perception. London: Routledge. 77.

considered myself as what Husserl calls a 'living body (Leib)'[6] situated in a specific 'lived experience'[7]. I argue that to be lost involves a complex departure from a state of arbitrary disarray and the arrival at the recognition that one is specifically disorientated, orientated against or apart from what they know to be familiar. To be lost, one needs a space to be lost in. Sara Ahmed raises Kant's example, written in his 1786 essay 'What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thought?" of 'walking blindfolded into an unfamiliar room. You don't know where you are, or how where you are relates to the contours of the room, so how would you find your way around the room? How would you find your way to the door so you can leave the room?'[8] I had a difficult start: I could not recognise my disorientation, because I did not think in terms of orientation. I could not perceive what exactly it was I was orientated against, or around. I had been the blindness itself, not recognising that I was a body in a room, that there was even a room, that it was dark, or that there was a blindfold. However, there are always 'condition[s] for arrival'[9]. If one's orientation can be traced and explained, so can one's lack of orientation.

II.   Exiting familiarity, entering strangeness

Reading through Ahmed's text, I was shocked. Written down, poignantly and with utmost clarity, was a system of thought I had never considered but made total sense. It quickly troubled my existing perceptions. I was amazed, but also confused. Scared. Through the lens of phenomenology, it was painfully obvious that I had never tried to orientate myself, and I could begin to trace this lack of orientation as a condition that clarified the several previously unexplainable emotions and events that had happened since I'd moved to London. Where had I lost my way and how would I attempt to find it? Not only did I want to configure my orientations, I wanted to understand why I had failed to consider them for so long. With all the theory I had read, I needed a starting point. Borrowing

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[6] Ahmed, Sara. 2006. Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others. Durham: Duke University Press. 2.
[7] ibid.
[8] Ahmed, Sara. 2006. Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others. Durham: Duke University Press. 6.
[9] ibid, 10.

Husserl's words, I chose to begin with myself as a 'zero point'[10]. I begin with a recounting of experiences I had in London while tracing the disorientations that made them possible.

In Singapore, I had lived life in an arbitrary manner. I seeked knowledge; some of which specific to other bodies and communities, but I never made an effort to situate myself in these knowledges. I was a voracious user of the World Wide Web, spending hours every day consuming knowledge about other cultures and forming numerous friendships with people from various countries (I made my first online friend when I was eleven). I was proud of my ability to 'transcend' any geological fixedness and interact with the world with ease. This generality was exacerbated by my life in Singapore, where I never felt the need to think about how I was orientated because it was comfortable and familiar (this fluidity of identity is even encouraged by the Singaporean state, as discussed in page 9-10). Before coming to London, I didn't imagine I would have any trouble blending into the crowd. What else would I need if I could prove my global identity with my general knowledge, diverse interests, and a proficient command of a shared language? The reality check was swift and unforgiving when my experience of London first began. My perception of self was suddenly incongruent with how I was being perceived. As this new space '"impress[ed]" on [my] body', it was 'marked' by 'unfamiliar impressions'[11] that I did not know how to navigate.

In Singapore, English is spoken as our first language. I was instantly made aware that this was uncommon knowledge: wherever I went, I was asked if I spoke English, how I was so good when I said I could, if Singapore was in China, or if I was, in fact, from China. I avoided eye contact on the street as much as possible, because I quickly learned that strangers had a penchant for saying 'Nihao' (hello in Mandarin) whenever our gaze met. At the same time, I could not integrate into the Chinese community in London, due to the language and cultural barriers. The experience of being in a room of white people who speak my language and Chinese people who look like me, yet being unable to

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[10] Husserl, Edmund, Richard Rojcewicz, and André Schuwer. 1989. Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution. Dordrecht ; Boston: Kluwer Academic.

[11] Ahmed, Sara. 2006. Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others. Durham: Duke University Press. 9.

connect deeply to either threw me out of my depth. I was clearly not the global citizen I had imagined myself to be. For the first time in my life, I was being acutely reminded of the spaces I was expected to remain within and without. The space I had been in in Singapore was one of immense privilege, one that enabled me to move within spaces while conscious of identity politics yet spared from their restrictions. In a space where I had to confront myself as a political body, I was at a complete loss.

I spent copious amounts of time in my bed, dreaming. Often I prioritised them over my conscious reality. My days passed by like this. My dreams swallowed me, and I recorded them extensively. I could not explain this occurrence for many months. However, the moment I began to consider myself as a situated body, it became apparent that my dreaming was in fact a result of an acute disconnection from my surroundings, from spaces, from people, from my self-identity. Reading Sara Ahmed's writing on familiarity helped me to connect the dots between disorientation, familiarity and my dreams. At the time, the comfort of dreaming was addictive, as was the feeling of inhabiting a dream-space that was completely constituted from my consciousness. It felt like everything I would see and feel and sense in these dreams were wholly mine and familiar, because I had birthed it entirely. If '[f]amiliarity is shaped by the "feel" of space or by how spaces "impress" upon bodies', then 'the familiar is shaped by actions that reach out toward objects that are already within reach'.[12] In my dreams, everything was within my reach. My body extended into infinity.

However, as Ahmed accurately describes, 'being lost can in its turn become a familiar feeling [...] Even when things are within reach, we still have to reach for those things for them to be reached.'[13] I had failed to consider the 'what "it" is that we "overlook" when we reside within the familiar'.[14] Ahmed continues, in a separate section, '[i]f orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails.'[15] In order for the world to 'create new impressions', I needed to put in 'the work of inhabiting space' and 'dynamic[ally]

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[12] Ahmed, Sara. 2006. Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others. Durham: Duke University Press. 7.
[13] ibid.
[14] ibid, 34.
[15] ibid, 11.

negotiat[e]   between what is familiar and unfamiliar'.[16] My reliance on the comfort of my dreams indicated my inability to situate myself in an unfamiliar environment. With the help of phenomenology, this was about to change.

III.   Inherited orientations

My experiences within London, now identifiable as symptoms of my disorientation, alerted me to the fact that I had troubled relations with the external markers of identity I had been relying upon. They no longer held up in this new land, in my present body, in my current reality. What did it mean to be anything I had imagined myself as? My identity as a Singaporean-Chinese, as a descendant of Chinese immigrants in a country historically and presently made up of migrant settlements cannot be described as stable or fixed. I needed to engage with these orientations with the same dynamism as the conditions of their arrival. I turned to my past experiences as an effort to pay attention to the 'minute perceptions'[17] that might've gone unnoticed. I started by looking back into my childhood years, to find and trace threads to any possible paths of orientation. I began to remember.

All my life I carried a feeling of barrenness and detachment, especially when queried about my relationship to my homeland, that I never thought was possible to address (belatedly, I realise this feeling and the non-specific, cosmopolitan attitude I had towards my identity and knowledge were in fact orientated around each other). I was not the only one; friends would confess over casual conversations about how there wasn't much they connected to in Singapore, or that Singaporean identity was some kind of government sham. This is the environment I grew up around, and whether I had as a result absorbed such ideas or simply been reassured that I was not alone in my thinking is not clear. Nevertheless, the feeling remained unaddressed. I often found myself at odds with it, and would resort to external means to orientate my identity around, like going on the Internet, collecting interests,

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[16] ibid, 7.

[17] Leibniz, Von, Peter Remnant, and Jonathan Bennett. 1996. New Essays on Human Understanding. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 115-16.

or reading on a wide range of topics. I was not pointed to the specificity of such a detachment until I came to London. In Goldsmiths University itself I'd met several peers who were extensively connected to their genealogies and their homeland. I had no clue where my great-grandparents came from! I felt like I had a huge, embarrassing secret, which I hid as students around me wrote and made artwork about their familial and national histories. This passion was exceptionally apparent in those who had come from post-colonial countries, which troubled me further as Singapore was exactly that: an ex-British colony that gained independence 58 years ago. What, then, was different? How might this difference explain the relations I have with my homeland, and this prevalent apathy?

Here, I wish to bring in Ahmed's writings on 'inheritance' and 'likeness'. She spatialises the idea of 'likeness' as 'proximities (and hence orientations)' that are 'inherit[ed]'. These proximities act as our 'point of entry into a familial space' and 'as "a part" of a new generation'. This rethinking of likeness suggests 'if we are shaped by "what" we come into contact with, then we are also shaped by what we inherit, which delimits the objects that we might come into contact with'.[18] If 'likeness' is 'inherited' by 'proximity', It was easy to see how I, as well as my generation, had inherited the likeness of Singapore's orientations, and how my 'proximity' had shaped the way I orientated myself unconsciously. It was imperative that I had to put careful work into tracing Singapore's orientations alongside my own. In her essay "Imagined Diasporas: Neoliberal Nationalism in Contemporary Singaporean Fiction and State Culture", Narumi Naruse posits Singapore as having 'conscious complicity in neocolonial practices', where 'unlike other postcolonial contexts that typically articulate a break from colonialism, state representations of Singaporean history effectively narrate the nation's independence as continuous with colonial contact'.[19] She cites C. J. W.-L. Wee, who states that 'Singapore is probably distinct among postcolonial societies in its valorization of the imperial past- a past of progress, it might be said.'[20] The Singaporean's government prioritisation of economic progress as 'the bottom line rationale for its governance' has turned Singapore into a 'contested space', as 'the state constantly

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[18] Ahmed, Sara. 2006. Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others. Durham: Duke University Press. 123.
[19] Naruse, Narumi. 2014. "Imagined Diasporas: Neoliberal Nationalism in Contemporary Singaporean Fiction and State Culture." https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/items/bb587944-72c4-4da5-bb0b-814e79fb7d9d. 17.
[20] ibid, 16.

refashions the nation according to perceived shifts in the global economy and constantly seeks new cultural strategies to achieve its economic agenda'.[21] A report 'Singapore 21: Together, We Make the Difference' was released in 1999, by a committee initialised by former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in August 1997, a few months after the 1997 Asian financial crisis began. The report states that '[t]he Singaporean of the 21st century is a cosmopolitan Singaporean' who has to 'be 'world ready,' able to plug-and-play with confidence in the global economy'[22]. Naruse convincingly argues that '[i]t is this "cosmopolitan turn" [...] that gave rise to the prominence of diasporic Singaporeans in state discourse.'[23] This was the 'likeness' that I had 'inherited', reflected in the construction of my identity, my oversight of my genealogies, and my indifference to my homeland.

In considering 'proximity', I was also able to clarify intergenerational differences around one's relationship to 'home'. Recently, I confessed to my mother that my generation seemed plagued by apathy towards the community and their Singaporean identity, and asked whether it was different for her generation. Her answer came without pause: 'It is different. Our generation feels a stronger connection to the homeland because we witnessed the pain of our parents and the generation before them having to rebuild themselves and the community after the war, [so] we feel more bonded. You kids are lucky, the government takes such good care of you, you don't have to work as hard to earn money. You don't know pain.' 'Lucky' is an interesting choice, but I see now that it simply reflects the orientations she as well as many Singaporeans have picked up in the proximity of Singapore's relentless propagation of economical success as the sole demarcation of a prospering society. If we consider the generation before mine as being orientated around pain (and resultant kinship), my generation can be posited as being orientated against that, fuelled by our neoliberalist government's drive to detach the nation of its troubled past, to point us outwards and apart as citizens of the world.

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[21] ibid, 17.

[22] Singapore, Prime Minister's Office, *Singapore 21: Together, We Make the Difference*, 1999, Preface.

[23] Naruse, Narumi. 2014. "Imagined Diasporas: Neoliberal Nationalism in Contemporary Singaporean Fiction and State Culture." https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/items/bb587944-72c4-4da5-bb0b-814e79fb7d9d. 20.

As the conditions of my dis/orientations resurface, I no longer blame myself for my detachment from my national identity, nor for having struggled in the years of moving to a new country. What had been a hopeless feeling of emptiness has begun to ebb away. In fact, I now feel the drive to extend myself towards unfamiliar territory; before orientating myself, I had imagined London as the epicentre of all that was strange. What I now realise is that my relations to my homeland had been just as unfamiliar, unconsidered, and unnoticed. My disorientation in London was the necessary catalyst to recognising them as problematic and unstable.

IV.   Finding my way

Usually, one might conclude such an essay with an organisation of success stories that arrives after all the conflict. However, as I stated in my introduction, I am still arriving. This paper is motivated by an investigation, of a 'troubling', more than the determination to arrive at somewhere final and specific. I spent a significant portion of my word count on the turbulence of recognising my disorientation, rather than the satisfactory resolutions one might expect. However, this is accurate to the process of undergoing this perceptual shift: most of my labour went into the un-learning and re-working of self.

Although this paper reflects just one process of orientation that has begun since I was exposed to the practice of phenomenology and Sara Ahmed's text, I have received clarity in many other facets of my life, including a deep loss. I have begun to situate myself in relation to all that is within and without reach. Compared to when this essay was first due a year ago, the fact that I am able to write this essay now assures me that I have been somewhat successful in finally finding some means of orientation. I have initiated conversations with my parents in an effort to trace unrecorded genealogies, and delved into national archives. Instead of aspiring to be a 'citizen of the world',[24] phenomenology has helped me finally re-enter my body, to sit and begin with myself specifically. The practice of writing and thinking from my point of view has not been easy: often I had to question the validity of my own

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[24] Singapore, Prime Minister's Office, *Singapore 21: Together, We Make the Difference*, 1999. 131.

experience, especially when confronting the way I had lived for so long, why I had allowed myself to do so, and if it could ever be changed. It has been exhausting, laborious and perplexing, but through all the difficulty I have managed to find some footing. Most unexpectedly, this practice of orientation has touched those close to me: as I talk to loved ones from Singapore about my research, they have begun to be curious as well. Somewhere along my way, communal healing seems within reach.

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